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Christopher Harrison

MARTHA TUCKER MORRIS, Salem, Indiana.

When the adventurers of the east had settled into well organized homes and cities, the pioneer began to wander to the middle west, and followers of Daniel Boone and George Rogers Clark began to make the history of southern Indiana. Many men breathing the spirit of nature and adventure came to the towns along the Ohio river and pushing further inland the town of Salem began to be a place of importance in the settlement of southern Indiana.

It is the life of one of those early men of whom we write; a peculiar and striking figure with an air of mystery surrounding him, even in the days when in Indiana, wild beasts and rough and ready fights for the survival of the strongest, left little time for mystery.

Christopher Harrison, from 1815 until 1835, perhaps something like twenty years, claimed Salem and the vicinity as his home. It is fitting that a Salemite honor his memory by reviewing the incidents of his life. The subject of this sketch was born in Cambridge, Dorchester county, Maryland, in the year 1775. The family came from England about the middle of the eighteenth century. His father, Robert Harrison, lived and died on a farm called "Appleby" in the suburbs of Cambridge. His son Christopher received a liberal education, being a graduate of St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland, and receiving also a finishing classical course in Europe. While studying to become a lawyer, he served as confidential clerk to William Patterson, one of the wealthy merchants of Baltimore, and is said to have been also a tutor of Elizabeth Patterson daughter of the merchant.

Slavery was accepted in Maryland, at this time, as part of the social life and Christopher Harrison inherited a number of slaves. An unusual trait of character is shown by him, when he received this inheritance, as he gave these slaves their freedom. Many versions of the romance, connected with the life of Harrison, are given. It is the privilege of the writer to have the telling of this romance from a resident of Salem in the early days, Dr. A. W. King, living in Redlands, California.

I distinctly remember Harrison, as I frequently passed his home—the old Isaac Chase corner—sitting on his porch or under a tree, seemingly enjoying his quiet, solitary life. He was genial and pleasant, but never gushing. You couldn't jolly him as you could D. G. Campbell, Benoni Morris or Colonel Menaugh. He was more of the dignified sort as John I. Morrison, Beebe Booth or John H. Butler. He was rated as a young man of fine social qualities, but an unfortunate love affair, seemed to have revolutionized him in this and made him a misanthrope. He had fallen desperately in love with Miss Elizabeth Patterson, a dashing Baltimore belle and beauty, and things went on swimmingly, till a sprig of royalty in the person of Jerome Bonaparte, crossed their path. The love of a distinguished name, and the prestige it might give her in society, caused Miss Patterson to turn down her humble lawyer for the more brilliant prospect. Harrison was a changed man. He lost all faith in female honesty and constancy and while he never forgot, when in their society, that he was a gentleman, he was ever irresponsive to their attractions and blandishments and tabooed society as much as possible.

Whether this romance was true, or only a romance, we may not know, but something unusual, must have caused a man of his temperament, to leave the comforts of a Maryland community, and seek the life of a pioneer. His name was found engraved on a tree, dated July 8, 1808, and this is supposed to be the beginning of his life in the territory of Indiana. This tree was near his cabin door, the cabin being built on a point called Fair Prospect, probably the present site of Hanover College, and giving a most beautiful view of the Ohio river from the Indiana side.

Maurice Thompson, in his *Stories of Indiana*, says, this cabin was a single room, and that Christopher Harrison lived there for seven years, painting many pictures on the walls, and living the life of a hermit. William W. Woollen in *Historical Sketches of Indiana* tells us he built a kennel for his dogs, back of his cabin, jutting against its chimney of clay, and supported

himself by hunting. He had a knowledge of several languages, and his books formed a part of his life, wherever he went.

However, even in these early days, a hermit began to have neighbors, and in 1809, John Paul was busy establishing his family near the present site of Madison, having purchased large tracts of land in this vicinity, at the public sale of land in Jeffersonville in 1808.

Mr. Paul later named it (the town he founded), Madison, and with the expanding purpose of making it the seat of justice of the newly erected county, he admitted as partners in the project, two Cincinnati pioneers, Lewis Davis and Jonathan Lyon in 1810, and in 1815 Jacob Burnet, also of Cincinnati. * * * In 1811, John Paul and Jonathan Lyon established the first ferry from Madison to the Kentucky shore opposite, at Milton.¹

That Harrison must have met these pioneers and become interested in financial investments of the time is shown from the following:

The territorial legislature sitting in Corydon in 1814 chartered two banks. One of them to be located at Vincennes and the other at Madison. John Paul, founder of Madison, and a hero of the George Rogers Clark campaign, was behind the latter. The capital stock of the Madison bank was to be \$750,000. The Madison bank, called the Farmers and Mechanics was promptly organized by John Paul, John Ritchie, Christopher Harrison, Henry Ristine, N. Hurst and D. Blackmore.²

It may be that this association with the pioneers of Madison explains his friendship for Jonathan Lyon, causing him in 1815 to sell his cabin to George Logan and move to Salem with Mr. Lyon. Salem was at that time one of the most important towns in the territory of Indiana. They brought with them a stock of merchandise and opened one of the first dry goods stores in the town of Salem. Harrison built the first brick house in the town and improved upon his Hanover cabin by building two rooms, one, however, barely large enough for a bed. The lot was 72 by 144 feet, northeast corner of the public square of today and now occupied by the beautiful Salem State bank building and a large brick building, housing the post office of the town.

Harrison in his new home added to his painting and books a garden of flowers and this with a few fine old forest trees made his home the most beautiful in the town. He is said to

¹ *Indiana Magazine of History*, June, 1917, "Colonel John Paul".

² Esarey, *History of Indiana*, 234.

have been very generous with the boys and girls giving them many bouquets of flowers from his garden, and pictures painted by his skillful hands. There is today in Salem, a small trinket box, painted by Christopher Harrison for little Mary Curry, who lived near his home. A colored woman came each morning to care for his home, but older people were not encouraged to visit and he lived almost the life of a recluse, as he had on the banks of the Ohio river.

The first labor in a public capacity, in Salem, by Harrison was the making of three maps of the county, on a scale of one-half inch to the mile, for which service he was allowed by the first board of commissioners, in 1817, the sum of \$15. He was also judge of the Washington county court, for one term, which explains the title bestowed upon him.³

It has been said he made a plat of the town also. The early public records of Washington county show many deeds for lots, to Jonathan Lyon and Harrison, and to Harrison alone. Deed Book B, page 63. Alexander Craig to Christopher Harrison and Jonathan Lyon. Lot 7, Salem, March 18, 1818, probably the purchase of the store building. Deed Book A, page 259. Alexander Craig to Christopher Harrison. Lot 11, Salem, April 11, 1817, is the lot upon which he built his brick home. A very interesting record from Deed Book F, page 129, shows that he still held that all men should be free.

Salem, Washington County and State of Indiana, October 6th, 1830. We certify, that we have known the bearer hereof (a mulatto man, about twenty-four years old, five feet nine inches high, in his stockings, some powder marks in his face, and a small scar on his right arm) from the time he was a small boy, his name is Enoch Delano. The said Enoch Delano, his mother and several small children have resided for many years in this place and have always been considered as free, and as such have never been in any way molested or disturbed. The said Enoch Delano has always conducted himself in a peaceable and orderly manner and we hope and request that he may pass free and unmolested as a free man.

CHRISTOPHER HARRISON,
MICAH NEWBY,
JOSEPH GREEN,
JOHN CURRY.

³ Stevens, *History of Washington County*.

Another interesting record, showing the confidence of the Salem citizens, in his honesty, and upright character is as follows: Deed Book D, page 293.

Whereas Isaac A. Dennis, about the 4th of April, 1826, left with Christopher Harrison, of Salem, Indiana, for safe keeping, sundry bonds, notes and mortgages, belonging to him, the said Dennis, amounting to about twenty-one or twenty-two hundred dollars, for which the said Harrison gave to said Dennis, his receipt for the same and whereas the said Dennis wishes to receive from said Harrison the papers as left in his care, but has left the said receipt in the state of Rhode Island, now be it known, that I, Isaac A. Dennis, have received and do now acknowledge the receipts and writings and of all papers and writings left in his care, for safe keeping and forever release the said Harrison from all claims for the same and for all claims and demands whatever.

(Signed) ISAAC A. DENNIS.

In presence of John McMahan.

The best description of the personal appearance of Judge Harrison is found in *Biographical and Historical Sketches* by William W. Woollen.

Governor Harrison was a well-built man, of medium height. While he lived in the cabin near where Hanover now is, he was erect in carriage, but later in life, he became bent or stoop-shouldered. He had an oval face, light complexion and blue eyes, says one authority. Another describes him the same, except that his eyes were gray. He was careful of his dress. Usually he was clean shaved and in his person was always scrupulously clean. He was a free-thinker, but he had great respect for the Quaker church. After he returned to Maryland, he frequently extolled the virtues of the Quakers he knew in Indiana. He was a great student, being a voracious reader of books. Judge Banta has a couple of books, one of them printed in Latin, which once belonged to the old pioneer. They contain notes and emendations in his handwriting and interspersed through them are beautiful pictures in water colors, drawn by the deft hand of their owner.

When Judge Harrison had been a citizen of Salem one year the territory of Indiana became a state, and he was elected first lieutenant-governor in 1816, with Jonathan Jennings, as the first governor. The vote cast for lieutenant-governor being 7,474, of which Harrison received 6,570.⁴

The governor and lieutenant-governor were both against slavery in the new state and in many ways were the right men for the highest office the people of Indiana could give in this first year of statehood. It was very unfortunate that condi-

tions arose that caused the lieutenant-governor to appear in a rather unfavorable light.

President Monroe, in 1818, appointed Governor Jennings, General Cass, and Judge Benjamin Parke, a resident of Salem, to negotiate a treaty with the Indians. The constitution of Indiana prohibited the governor of the state from holding any office under the United States, but Governor Jennings, disregarding this, accepted the appointment and wrote to the lieutenant-governor at Salem.⁵

Understanding some official business is necessary to be transacted, permit me to inform you that my absence is still necessary and that it may be necessary for you to attend the seat of government to discharge such duties as devolve on the executive of Indiana. Lieutenant-Governor Harrison thereupon went to Corydon, took possession of the executive office, and performed the duties of governor until Jennings return from St. Mary.

Lieutenant Governor Harrison, we think, very honestly thought that Governor Jennings had vacated the office of governor by this act, and that he should be recognized as acting governor of the state. Governor Jennings felt he was justified in his action by the good accomplished.⁶

In the series of treaties, they succeeded in purchasing from the Indians claim to all the lands in the central part of the state. This was a very important transaction for Indiana and was sufficient excuse, in the opinion of the majority of the people, for the violation of the clause in the constitution which forbids the governor of the state to hold any office under the United States. In order to insure success the contemplated proceedings were kept secret. The negotiations were not protracted and the offense, whatever it may have been, was wholly inadvertent on the part of the governor.

The matter was taken up by the legislature and Jennings recognized as governor. Harrison resigned, sending to the house of representatives the following letter, dated Corydon, December 18, 1818:

I have this day delivered to the Secretary of State, to be filed in his office, my resignation of the office of Lieutenant-Governor of this State. As the officers of the executive department of government and the General Assembly have refused to recognize and acknowledge that authority which, according to my understanding, is constitutionally attached to the office, the name itself, in my estimation, is not worth retaining.

⁵ Esanel, *History of Indiana*, 225.

⁶ Cockrum, *Pioneer History of Indiana*.

The following resolution was passed by the House:

Resolved, That the House of Representatives view the conduct and deportment of Lieutenant-Governor Christopher Harrison as both dignified and correct, during the late investigation of the differences existing in the executive department of this State.

In 1819, at the August election, Lieutenant-Governor Harrison was a candidate for governor, but was defeated. He continued to serve the state in many important commissions and his influence for good was in no way impaired by this experience, but before taking up these commissions, we should like to go back to 1817, and the early days of Masonry in the territory of Indiana and tell of the service of Harrison to Salem and the future state of Indiana. Masonry seems to have been a very essential trait of the character of the early settlers of Indiana, and as soon as possible lodges were organized and meetings held in the cabins. It is to be regretted that the early records of Salem were destroyed by fire and the account of the organization of the Grand Lodge of Indiana, in which Christopher Harrison had a very strong influence, must be given from William Woolen's *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 494.⁷

The first lodges were organized at Vincennes, Lawrenceburg, Vevay, Rising Sun, Madison, Charlestown, Brookville, Salem and Corydon. These lodges received their dispensations or charters from Ohio or Kentucky. On the 3rd day of December, A. D. 1817, delegates from these various lodges met at the old town of Corydon to make arrangements for organizing a Grand Lodge for the Territory of Indiana. * * * But eleven Masons were present at this meeting. They laid the foundation of the Grand Lodge and what has indeed become a grand body in Indiana. They have all passed to the Grand Lodge above, but their names will ever be commemorated as the founders of Masonry in Indiana. Some of them have children and grandchildren now prominent members of the fraternity. The eleven were General W. Johnston, S. C. Stevens, Abel C. Peper, Christopher Harrison, Henry P. Thornton, Joseph Bartholomew, John Miller, Davis Floyd, Hezekiah B. Hull, James Dill and A. Buckner. * * * In 1826 the Grand Lodge met at Salem, a little town nestled among the hills of Washington County. Thirty-two lodges were represented, covering a territory extending from the Ohio River to the Wabash. Then there was no railroad in the State and no public conveyance between the towns where lodges were located. Some of the delegates rode more than a hundred miles on horseback. We can see in imagination the sturdy yeomen assembled in a log cabin, the grand old primeval forest about them, and the wolves for sentinels. Less than

four hundred Masons were then represented by all the lodges of the State. The records show that the Grand Lodge met at Corydon in 1817, 1821, and 1822; at Madison in 1818, 1819, 1823, and 1824; at Salem in 1825, 1826, 1827, and 1832, at Vincennes in 1831, and there was an adjourned meeting at Charlestown in 1818.

Salem as shown had the meeting, three years in succession, and no doubt because of the enthusiasm of the masons in the community, and this spirit we think, caused largely by the influence of Christopher Harrison in the organization work of the state.

The condition of roads for travel and the necessity of better ways of transacting the rapidly growing interests of the state, brought about the question of building state roads, and in 1818, Christopher Harrison was made the first agent of a state fund called the three per cent fund. This has been explained very clearly in Esarey's *History of Indiana*. 242.

One can scarcely realize the condition of travel in 1825. There was no railroad, no canal, no pike. All the rivers except the Ohio were obstructed by fallen trees, ripples and bars. Two main roads led to Indianapolis, one from Madison, the other from Centerville. The transportation service, if any was to be had, was bad, roads frequently impassable and stages usually late. Two schemes for carrying on internal traffic were early taken up, by the Indiana government. The earliest was the building of state roads, with the three per cent funds. Congress had set aside five per cent of the net proceeds of all the lands sold in Indiana for road building. Three per cent of this was placed at the disposal of the General Assembly, and was known as the three per cent fund. He (Harrison) received the money from the United States and paid it out, according to appropriation by the General Assembly, to the county agent. The county agent used it in opening roads through the forest. Such roads, known as state roads, were one hundred feet wide, but the money was not sufficient to do more than clear them of timber.

During the time that Judge Harrison was agent for this land money, as it was called, Benoni Morris, an early settler of Salem and a Quaker from North Carolina, was commissioned by Harrison to transport a large sum of money from Vincennes to Salem. Morris traveled in a wagon, driven by two stout horses, camping out at night, and delivered the money safely. The money was in boxes so much to the box, but he had no knowledge of the amount entrusted to his care. The money was mostly gold and silver. Jephtha Morris, a boy

at the time, went with his father and the only guard they had was two dogs, not even a gun to defend the costly load.

The site of the capital of the state having been selected, the legislature appointed a commission, January 6, 1821, to lay off the town. This commission was composed of Christopher Harrison, James Jones and Samuel Booker, but when the time came, only Harrison appeared ready for work.⁸

Of the Commissioners elected, Christopher Harrison was the only one to appear at the place on the date fixed upon. Without delay he carried on alone the survey and the sale of lots, a proceeding very properly legalized by an act of the Legislature in November, 1821. Judge Harrison was one of the most interesting characters who ever reached Indiana. He came from Maryland, was possessed of some wealth, had a fine education and a taste for art. * * * Harrison selected Alexander Ralston and Elias Fordham, as surveyors of the new Capital, and Benjamin I. Blythe as clerk to the commissioners. Ralston was a Scotchman, a man of ability, who had been entrusted by Lord Roslin with important engineering work, before coming to this country. He had assisted Major L'Enfant, companion of Lafayette in surveying Washington, the national Capital. It is a well known fact that the design employed by L'Enfant influenced Ralston in his survey of Indianapolis, the scheme involving as it does a circle in the center, with radiating avenues and streets, intersecting at right angles. Fordham the second surveyor, well educated and of a discerning mind, was a member of an ancient family in the east of England. He was a pupil of George Stephenson, inventor of the locomotive steam engine. The association of the men concerned with the beginning of Indianapolis, with those of the far away world, will bear repeating: Harrison with the beautiful Miss Patterson and Jerome Bonaparte; Ralston with Lord Roslin, Aaron Burr, L'Enfant, Lafayette, and Fordham with George Stephenson.

It is interesting to remember also that the subject of this sketch was the one who chose the men so well fitted to plan the capital city of our state. At the sale of the lots, in October, Harrison purchased a number of lots, some of which he held until after he left the state.

Maurice Thompson, in *Stories of Indiana*, tells of Christopher Harrison's last public commission for the state.

In 1824 Christopher Harrison and William Hendricks were appointed to locate a canal around the falls of the Ohio near Jeffersonville. They made their report the following year and filed it on January 18, 1825. * * * Christopher Harrison's connection with the canal scheme ended when he and Governor William Hendricks made their report. After that

⁸ Hodges, *Early Indianapolis*.

he passed out of public life. He moved from Salem to a farm a few miles in the country, where he again took up a lonely life of study and outdoor recreation. He took great interest in growing fine watermelons, and here again, he remembered the children of Salem. He would cut the names of all the boys and girls he knew upon the rinds of as many watermelons; then with his wagon loaded he would enter the town and proceed to distribute his luscious gifts. You may be sure that he was beloved by the young people.

This farm has been difficult to locate, as Lieutenant-Governor Harrison owned several farms near Salem. However it seems probable it was one recorded in Deed Book O, page 64, north of Salem a few miles, and not sold until January 20, 1842, when he was a resident of Talbot county, Maryland. About 1834 or 1835, he left Salem and Indiana and went back to Maryland to live. The Deed Book H, page 192, shows he sold the little brick house in Salem, January 10, 1834.

After Governor Harrison returned to Maryland, he lived among his relatives and friends. For many years he resided with his sister, Mrs. Locherman, and spent his time, when not reading, in hunting and fishing in Chesapeake bay and its estuaries. In letters he says he is "uncle" to all the young folks in the neighborhood. Mr. Williams (a nephew by marriage) says:

He was a student all his life, and his acquirements were various and extensive. He was not satisfied with a superficial knowledge of anything, he went into matters thoroughly. He was reticent, and it was difficult to get at what he knew or thought on any subject. He was the soul of honor, and no man I ever knew had a more thorough contempt for a mean act. He was generous to excess. He had no love for money or its accumulation. He had opportunities for making a fortune, but he gave away as he made. From the simplicity of the man and his great goodness I became greatly attached to him. He was the best informed man I ever met. At one time he lived in my family for ten years, and I knew him thoroughly. He was an honest man and died poor. He was a remarkable man and deserves a place in history.⁹

And as we near the close of this interesting life, we have from Maurice Thompson a story that takes us back to Salem and gives us his idea of the Maker of the Universe. To a Quaker exercised about the salvation of his soul, Harrison said, "God is love, and love never loses anything; it is infinitely

⁹ Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*.

forgiving. My soul can not be lost", and Thompson adds: "Perhaps the man was thinking of his own enduring love, by the light of which his whole long life was spent." His life of 88 years ended peacefully at the home of Mr. H. C. Tilghman in Talbot county, Maryland, in 1863.

It is the privilege of the Daughters of the American Revolution in Salem to honor the memory of this man and the influence of his life, for the good of the town of Salem, and the state of Indiana by naming their Chapter the Christopher Harrison Chapter, of Salem, Indiana.